

PALAMA Settlement and the Tenement QUESTION



By HOWARD D. CASE

If a giant compass could be used to describe a circle with the Palama Settlement as a center, and with radii extending North into the Kūhāwāi district, South past Iwilei to the beach, East to include Emma street and West as far as the government stables, within that area would be found what is today commonly known as Honolulu's congested section; in other words, that section common to every metropolis where the people of many nationalities live huddled together, the majority in buildings of a type which the mainland cities brand as tenements. A tenement in the Paradise of the Pacific, equal, in some instances, to those which the social and settlement workers find in eastern United States, seems improbable; but an investigation of the district in question need only be made to bring out the true conditions.

It is not the purpose of this story, however, to arouse a controversy with regard to the present existing conditions of local tenements, nor is it an appeal to the property owners to tear down such structures situated on their lands. The enterprising tenement owner keeps his buildings in good condition; and if they become insanitary and are made the subject of an investigation, it is generally the fault of the tenants. In nearly every city of size, especially those inhabited by the people of a score of different races, there is generally a spirited feeling against the tenements, and social and settlement workers are continually working to relieve the conditions. This story, therefore, deals principally with the work which the Palama Settlement, that great community factor of Honolulu, is carrying on with the two-fold view of ridding the city of congestion and, in the end, eradicating the tenement. Of course, conditions in Honolulu today are not to be compared with the conditions in other cities; but it is primarily the same, although on a smaller scale.

Before taking up the subject of its work with the tenements, it is first necessary to state briefly the history of the settlement. On June 1, 1896, the settlement was opened under the name of the Palama Chapel, being an sentiment towards better housing

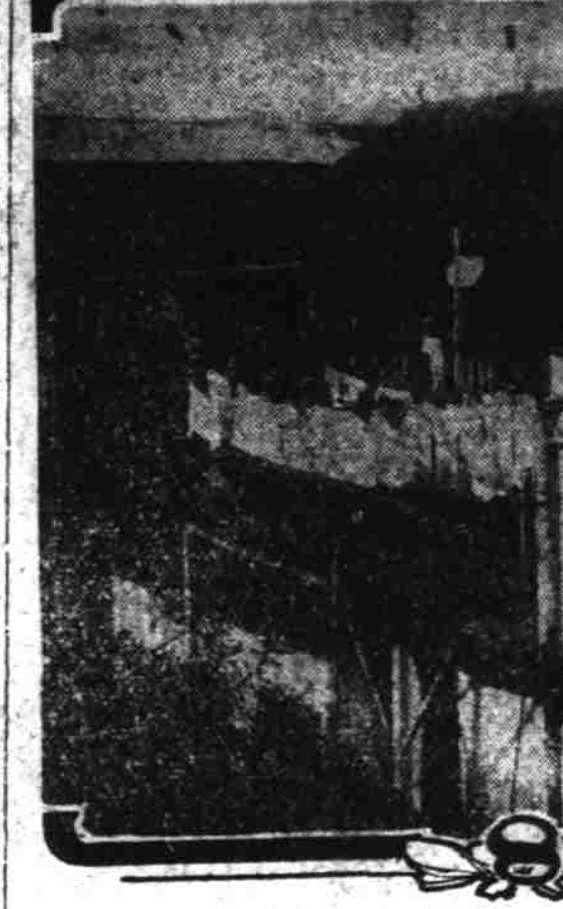
adjunct to Central Union church. The land was purchased by Mr. and Mrs. P. C. Jones, who erected a building at a cost of \$4300, and the work of the institution was carried on under this name for nine years. In January, 1905, the supervision of the work was taken over by the Hawaiian Board of Missions, and in March of the same year, James A. Rath, the present headworker, arrived in Honolulu. Rath was brought here to carry on not a mission work but a modern social and evangelical work. This labor grew until it was deemed advisable that the settlement become incorporated, and the Hawaiian board of missions and Central Union church consented to transfer the lands they held in fee simple to the new board of trustees. The charter was issued by the territorial treasurer July 1, 1910, since which time the settlement has been and is an incorporated, eleemosynary institution.

Upon his arrival in Honolulu, the first thing Rath undertook was an exhaustive survey of the neighborhood with a view to ascertaining the conditions as they existed at that time. He found here, as he had found elsewhere, that housing conditions had a great deal to do with moral and physical defects. Believing as Lord Disraeli did when he said: "I have always felt that the best security for civilization is the dwelling, and that upon properly appointed and becoming dwellings depends more than anything else the improvement of mankind. Such dwellings are the nursery of all domestic virtues, and without a becoming home the exercise of those virtues is impossible," Rath felt that it would be impossible to do much with the adults and children at that time, for after they had been with the settlement for a matter of hours, they would be forced to go back to their tenement homes amidst the same conditions. The settlement therefore devised a campaign whereby it planned to show the people of Honolulu that it would be impossible to do much under such conditions. This undertaking, together with the work which the board of health was carrying on at that time, and which the Civic Federation had joined in, helped to create a public

conditions and a gradual wiping out of the tenements. At one vital meeting of the Civic Federation a report was read which had been prepared by Rath and which contained startling facts concerning the life in the tenements.

The question of the tenements was incessantly agitated, and a result was gained finally in the passage of the new building law which today makes it a matter of considerable expense to erect a tenement. Then, the Board of Health has a marked degree of jurisdiction over the erection of such buildings from a standpoint of sanitation and cleanliness. The tenement exists, however, but, as any local social settlement worker will tell you, conditions have greatly improved during the past two years.

With headway thus gained toward an improvement in sanitary arrangements, the Palama Settlement began its active campaign toward ridding the city, or at least the Palama district, of the tenements. Through a local estate, an acre of ground on Hotel street mauka of the Homestead was given the settlement. Here were erected light 2-story cottages of the modern bungalow type, and worthy families, many of which had long been inmates of tenements, were allowed to rent these homes at a moderate fee. Each house accommodates two families, one on the first and one on the second floor, the second story being reached by an outside staircase. The families which came to occupy these houses, made but a small inroad on the tenement population, but the settlement was thoroughly satisfied to accept it as a beginning. The grounds



This provides a clean, sanitary place

manner, and two more cottages are to be erected in the near future. Then, in addition to the foregoing undertaking, the settlement has other cottages, 16 in number, on Dowsett Lane. The land on which they are situated was purchased by the Oahu Railway and Land Company and leased to the settlement. The settlement, in turn, rents them to desirable families at the rate of seven dollars per month. Each cottage is modern in structure, having three large rooms and a lanai. for those persons who exist on small wages, thus relieving them of the necessity of going to the tenements. It may be said here that the people among whom the settlement works have taken enthusiastically to this new plan of housing, and already there is a large waiting list of families wishing accommodation. Present Tenement Conditions. The present conditions of the tenements in the "circle" district are, as mentioned before, in a much better condition than they were two years

ago, due greatly to the efforts of the district nurses of the Palama Settlement. In their daily visits to patients and other persons in the tenements, the nurses receive a marked knowledge of the conditions and defects as to sanitation, etc., are immediately reported to the board of health, which in turn sends out its inspectors to solve the remedy. It was the Palama Improvement Club which first started the agitation against the congested district with a view to ridding the community of the great, solid blocks of tenements, many accessible only through narrow alleyways. If a fire were to break out in this district today, the fire hose would, in many cases, have to be carried into the center of the blocks, as the alleyways are too narrow to permit the passage of a fire engine or truck.

Many of these tenements have been the breeding place of crime, and the Palama nurses can tell stories of people whom they have found dying of some dread disease in a small, back room, windowless, where fresh air or sunlight never had a chance to penetrate. "I recall once being called in to see a man who was dying in a

small room in a tenement," says Headworker Rath, "and when I arrived there I found a drunken orgy going on in the room next door. The nurses make daily rounds, tending to make away with a repetition of such a scene." It is a fact that the white plague claims most of its victims from the tenement district, and this is one of the strongest points brought forth in proving that they are a menace to the health of the community. One of the results of the settlement's work against the tenements was shown when the Oahu Railroad and Land Company, which owned several buildings on King and Liliha streets, tore down the structures and turned the land over to the Palama Settlement to be used as a playground. This land has been leveled and fenced by the settlement and the apparatus is to be installed in the near future, making the site the largest of its kind and the best equipped in the city. A local estate which owned considerable buildings in Kakaako had them torn down and cottages were erected.

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PHOTOS by Perkins